

UNREADING THE NOVEL, OR EXPERIENCING NINOTCHKA ROSCA'S *STATE OF WAR* AS MYTHOPOEIA¹

Kathrine D. Ojano
Nueva Vizcaya State University
kojano1@binghamton.edu

Abstract

The Filipino novel which arose in the 19th century is understood to have consolidated the nationalistic spirit that fueled the anti-colonial revolution against Spain. Contemporary writing drew from the radical lessons of the past as a tradition of resistance writing intensified and grew. Yet as Ninotchka Rosca's *State of War* (1988) shows, the novel, despite or alongside its politics, also brings to the fore formal and substantial problems of excess and incoherence. This paper explores the instances of the mythical that bring about these points of incomprehensibility, even scattered, perhaps, absolute subversions of the genre and the nationalist cause in which it partakes. Becoming mythopoeia, the novel turns into a postcolonial mode of storytelling and (re)living myth that puts in peril (as it assures) its form, its cause, and even its readership. With theories of narrative and history by Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Nietzsche, more recent contributions to postcolonial studies by Filipino scholars, and insight into myth in modern fiction by Michael Bell, close reading of aspects of *State of War* will calibrate the mythical for meanings alternative to reductive or dismissive tendencies in critical theory.

Keywords

aesthetics, historical fiction, modernism, myth, opacity, postcolonial fiction

About the Author

Kathrine D. Ojano, who finished her Master of Arts degree in Comparative Literature at Binghamton University – State University of New York on a Fulbright scholarship in 2012, is a full-time instructor at the Nueva Vizcaya State University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. She teaches general education courses in communication arts, composition, and literature. Her research and study interests include resistance literature, women's writing, and folklore.

A century after the release of Jose Rizal's novels, Ninotchka Rosca's *State of War* (hereafter, *SOW*) was first published in 1988 in New York sometime after her self-exile from a conflict-ridden Philippines in the late 1970s. Later, in the years following *SOW*'s dissemination, there would appear a modest but sustained interest in the affinity between the works of Rizal and Rosca. Scholars have noted the painstaking ambition of both to write the Filipino nation's story as historical fiction. Indeed, as Nerissa Balce-Cortes notes, Rosca's concern is informed by a commitment that not only revives but also continues Rizal's project of rewriting the "homeland" (qtd. in de Manuel 102).

One cannot dismiss the causal supposition here that Rizal, having been an institution since the 1950s, has cast a shadow over generations of fictionists whose works since have had to survive the ineluctable fate of being measured against his "master-narratives" (Hau 4, 11). This impulse to compare is not without its reasons. Scholars unanimously observe that the full-fledged Filipino novel did not come about until Rizal (Mojares 115). Among its attributes, the realism in his fiction engaged his audience in satiric portrayals and political commentary (Watson 11-14). To the extent of depicting the gravity of colonial exploitation, Rizal may be regarded as the model fictionist not only of his milieu but also of the national literary tradition (Sicat 420-433). The novel, thus, debuts in Philippine society as a genre of representation whose polemical quality reveals the extent and limit of its utility at a time of transition.

Rizal strove to surpass this limit in *Noli Me Tangere* and in *El Filibusterismo*. Caroline Hau affirms the observation that his novels marked a turning point in the country's literary history. She ferrets out how Rizal, attempting to inscribe in totalities the experience of the community, confronted the many inabilities of realist fiction to represent. The rigors of her efforts are impossible to rehearse here. Suffice it to say that, through her unprecedented critique, Rizal's works regain their "groundbreaking" value, occluded now and then by state or non-state machinations. Specifically about fiction, Hau argues that the rise of the genre intensified the nationalist revolt, for which she calls, at the turn of 19th century, were already emanating from various fronts in the colony. Setting Rizal within the web of writings on the nation in the mainstream and in the underground Left, she restores "the radical potential" of fiction in intervening, hence, in rendering new modes of thinking and practices within structured efforts at maintaining the nation (Hau 5, 48-93).²

In consonance with Rizal's writings, *SOW* figures as a part of the postcolonial project of defining individual and collective selfhood. However, the distinctiveness of *SOW*'s form also warrants a better sense of this novel's place in the Philippine

literary tradition. How *SOW* diversifies the tradition it belongs to may be gleaned from the background of the author and available critique of her works.

Rosca was one of the 1970s generation of political expatriates in the US. Together with the earlier groups of migrants, the *Manongs* and the Flips, she confronted the phenomenon of “invisibilization” of Filipinos stemming from the US’ deliberate glossing over its colonial and neocolonial atrocities in the Philippines. The many-layered losses that Rosca’s group experienced were “inverted” in narratives of “exile and emergence.” Such stories subverted American discourse by reasserting in a rather idiosyncratic way the Filipino diasporic presence and struggles (Campomanes 51-55). Portraying the vast colonial and neocolonial resistances and the anti-dictatorship movement in the late 20th century Philippines, *SOW*, thus, resonates with its readers as a “roman à clef” (Davis 65).

Be that as it may, scholars have observed traits in Rosca’s text uncharacteristic of historical fiction. Along with her contemporaries, Rosca innovates “countermythic writing” by alternating histories with myths (Campomanes 70). *SOW*, whose female characters reclaim the body through “spiritual” renewal, does more than retell history. The “ethnic” identities that are defined in the text defy the rigidity of otherness (de Manuel 103-105). Similar to other contemporary Anglophone fiction in the Philippines, *SOW* is also structured experimentally. Ruth Pison observes that Rosca’s, like other Martial Law novels by Filipinos, falls under categories of “counter-memory” and “historiographic metafiction” (15-16). However, unlike Pison who makes Rosca’s style typical, Leonard Casper detects in the novel an aesthetic turn to which it proceeds so ungovernably that its “socio-political/moral impact” turns out getting too “concealed” (qtd. in Pison 178-179).

The reactions, although few and far between, affirm the difficulty in reading *SOW*. That the work won the National Book Award upon its release and that the writer is internationally acclaimed explain the dearth of accessible and published studies on *SOW* among others of Rosca’s works. There is then the passable issue of the inconsumability of her work compared to other dictatorship novels like Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*, which has commanded a following in the Philippine academe since it came out in 1990.³ Slipping in and out of molds, *SOW* turns opaque. This suggests that the excess brought about by the overflow of narratives leads to an unavoidable alienation of the novel’s readers.

One is reminded of the irony on which the accolade for Rizal rested. Among the masses to whom he dedicated his work, there came about a stirring not so much because they had read him but because they had fed on “rumors” and “fantasies” that came up around his reputation as a writer (Hau 51). Thus, when Resil Mojares, in tracing the emergence of the novel in the country, refers to Rizal’s *Noli* and *El*

Fili as having sprung up “Minerva-like from the head of Zeus,” he thereby attests to the Filipino novel’s unusual constitution and resulting problematic relationship to its supposed historical inspiration and intended audience (137). The paucity of attention to Rosca’s works partly reveals how unsurpassable for readers the barriers are. In the end, and as Hau realizes in reading Rizal, literature’s value is measured by what is said about it as much as what is unsaid. What is it that makes Rosca’s writing unreadable?

In a commentary she released online immediately after typhoon Haiyan devastated central Philippines in November 2013, Rosca rebuffs the condescension that has spread around especially in US mass media. Vehemently, she reverses the implication that the Filipinos are wretched victims of natural violence. She also attributes the patronizing rhetoric to the forgetting of resistances and victories of the Filipinos against unequal and oppressive ties with the US. This illustrates how she does not argue beyond politics in testing it out. Her writing only reinforces her commitment so deep that, for her, it cannot be but the substance of thought and production. However, no sieve can isolate the politics from her works which scintillate with folklore. Politics is tightly coupled with, if not springs from, the “indigenous worldview,” one which critical analyses often treat either as an undecidable or tamable component of writing. In her article, she says, “because this is a worldview which has to be lived in situ, it is unfathomable to the outsider...” The Filipinos struggling and “transform[ing]” in the face of catastrophe is to Rosca something that must be seen in context of the country’s indigenous heritage and folklore. This “transform[ing]” of the community is no different from the vocation of writing by the individual. Both arise out of an immersion in a worldview and risk being misunderstood outside of that worldview.

There is no mistaking that Rosca, like Rizal, sought to be accurate in the portrayal of the country’s story. However, these two writers of modernity are separated by such a stretch of discursive upheavals that the realism with which Rizal unwaveringly pulsed his community proved inadequate in Rosca’s time. An oft-quoted scene in *SOW* captures the tall order that the contemporary writer, then, sets upon her readers. Here is a cadre of the guerilla movement expressing his irritation at having to take up the task of seeing split. “History you say; history. Leche! You keep one eye on history, one eye on your enemy, and you get wall-eyed” (60). Purposeful understanding, Rosca implies, is a moving forward while looking elsewhere. In her novel, the mythical visions are the distractions that risk a measure of its success—the nearness to facts.

On second thought, do the mythopoeic intermissions really diminish the novel’s historical relevance? Does not the novel, rife with mythical moments, make a rather convincing purchase on the telling of the nation’s story? Further, in what manner

does *SOW* manifest as mythopoeia? How do mythmaking and myth threaten the genre of the novel? Moreover, how will an unreading of myth in *SOW* unmake the novel's politically specific role?

At this point, an understanding of myth in various contexts must now be offered so as to find footholds for approaching a mythopoeic text. European anthropologists of the 20th century offer an alternative view of myth as a composition of a bigger social system. Myth as part of ritual is therefore empirically grounded in the already sound ways of early non-Western societies (Malinowski in Homans 164). Structuralism, on one hand, acknowledges the way myth surpasses the limits of the system and practice of language, and on the other, shows the science in myth with the logical relations (or the necessary contradictions) of the various units that make it up (Levi-Strauss 103-114). Scholars also see an evolution in myth. Later, it grows out of its cultic function and becomes a component of more secular forms. Its elements fuse with folklore (Mojares 11, 17). Notwithstanding its devolvement to the secular after its sacred beginnings, myth still serves as paradigmatic reference for individual and collective life (Eliade 174, 182).

In the non-Western context, the importance of myth is highlighted especially since oral societies have persisted long since the aftermath of colonialism. The phenomenon of oral cultures thriving in the present has influenced scholars to think beyond the opposition between myth and modernity. Of late, there has been a more consistent exploration of the splicing of the two (Nandy 46; Mayaram 30-42).⁴ Whether to expose or to undo the distance from modernity, the views above show how usable myth is to contemporary thought. They demonstrate the moderate and farthest distances in which one may observe and historicize myth, hence, establish that it is pre-modern even as its vestiges may exist to this day. As befits substantiation or judgment, myth expands or declines.

Indeed, the non-Western reality places its writers in problematic conditions of uneven development. As Rajeev Patke points out, modernity has affected places at different times in specific ways. The colonial and now postcolonial end toward economic and political modernization, because it stays incomplete and unequal, has given rise to a plurality of aesthetic practices or modernisms that more often subvert concertedly and in their differing means the project's totalizing aims. Writers live with their native oral cultures even as modernity (never quite) closes in on them. Michael Bell in *Literature, Modernism and Myth* cites the Latin American context as an example where fictionists work simultaneously within and without their indigenous traditions. In these circumstances, writers can be the tellers and critics of their own stories of self and community (184, 199). It is important to note here the difference between an anthropological stance toward and an aesthetic occupation in myth. While a social scientist maintains neutrality in relation to

the artifact, the artist in his work exhibits another possibility. The fictionist uses myth as the means through which personal and collective realities are thought and told. No longer as an object of nostalgia, myth, instead, becomes what Bell in another work calls a “modality.” In a manner that follows the telling and receiving of oral tales, fiction becomes myth (“Myth” 207). Thus, a new form, mythopoeia, emerges. Because *SOW* often surrenders its historical and political relevance to myth, the novel, then, finds occasion to be studied. The causes for the nation that hold together Rosca’s writing are often matched if not overwhelmed by a grander aesthetic philosophy that radiates in the narrative.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche marks the birth and passing of the age of myth, and henceforth, the reworking of myth as poetic philosophy in the more mundane conditions of artistic creation. Bell’s intervention here is his reworking and extension of this Nietzschean aesthetic philosophy so that the ripples of the mythopoeic sustenance of ancient Greek dramatic practice may be understood in modernist literature. Among the 19th century British and European writers whom he studies, he finds that while realism appeared to be yet a functional means of telling, the writers also pushed against the rigidities of consciousness and control, of conventions and structure. The project often turned out to be a narrative integration of “disparate elements.” Myth, in this case, may embody that incomprehensible element in writing. For Bell, the action taken on the obscure must not only be exclusion. Rationality aside, one must submit to myth as a component of fiction. Hybridity in fiction must be recognized as a trait which is irreducible to laws, histories, or ideologies (*Literature* 80).

Aside from the more contemporary work of Bell, the separate reflections of Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin on mythopoeia and storytelling allow this study to make its way through *SOW*. Nietzsche and Benjamin traversed the threshold of thought and in doing so radicalized the philosophical and political movements which they are identified with. Their thoughts that critique and rework history and fiction, as well as politics and aesthetics, significantly frame this specific endeavor.

On that note, one may ask, is there a scheme of unreading the novel and, if so, in what way? The answer is hardly new. Concepcion Alaras and Matei Calinescu, using the oral tradition as a common resource, have separately reconsidered and reworked the custom of reading. As a practice, unreading, therefore, is not so novel, but because of its unsure aims neither is it a popular approach. Yet a few critics have taken this rarely trodden field to address a necessity. It is useful to point out that readers of Rosca, like those raised above, are often sensitized to her manner of storytelling. Fiction bids submission to its mythopoeic structure. In particular, *SOW* requires the critic to take in the orality inscribed in its contemporary form.

Based on her experienced otherness among indigenous groups in the Philippines, Alaras challenges her audience to start a “new orality.” Her proposal in the anthology of postcolonial practice in the country is one of a kind. She seeks to partly unmoor habit from criticism so as to engender practice “anchored on a folk tradition.” As a result, reading “would necessarily involve known and unknown frames of reference” (in Pantoja Hidalgo and Patajo-Legasto 22-24). Yet Alaras’s call is largely ignored in the Philippine academe since she falls short of showing how the oral culture would partly shape reading. In referencing Walter Ong, who has been critiqued for his teleological historicizing of orality, she also implies a dangerous reversion to primitive orality (Calinescu 55). One is tempted to ask, is literacy reversible?

Calinescu comes to terms with the contradictions. Primarily, he rejects the presumption in criticism that orality and literacy are binary opposites. He maintains that modernity does not bring about the outmoding of the former by the latter. On the contrary, these two are the necessary “paradoxes” that have always coincided in “reading/writing/rereading” (52). “Rereading,” literally meaning reencountering the text after the “first-time reading,” is a prized term in Calinescu’s scheme of thought (70).⁵ Finding rapport with the text, a reader develops a range of responses from the critical to the trivial.

Paying attention to the non-interpretive moments in rereading, Calinescu, in effect, dismisses the notion that any response to the text is trivial. For example, in the process, a reader grows attuned to the sound, rhythm, and formal devices of the written text. The text demands to be “sound[ed] out” or recited (65-66, 70). Moreover, one steps into “dimensions” of both linear and “circular time.” In apprehending a story over and over again, pleasure arises in seeing what is known in a new light. The reader, adhering to this “cycle” of repetition, participates in a kind of “private ritual” (52, 69-70). These instances of formal and substantial enjoyment of narrative prove, for Calinescu, that orality can be “textualized” or “written into the. . . text” but cannot turn obsolete (55).

Unreading derives from the calls of Alaras and Calinescu to feel, as it were, the orality of the written text. Calinescu’s “rereading,” the temporal and spatial nearness to the text, sets the condition of possibility for unreading *SOW*. The novel here becomes a rehearsal of familiar stories. Thus, Rosca’s fiction, through its orality, encourages readers to refrain from criticism and, instead, in the author’s way, to dwell in its worldview. Relived in the sense of a myth, fiction turns into mythopoeia.

Of course, interpretation is necessary. In fact, there are instances in this essay where passages are explained with respect to upheavals that marked Philippine history. However, this distancing is bridged by the reader’s synthetic knowledge of the narrative. The critical and non-critical tendencies are therefore inseparable

in reading. That they can be contradictory and uneven are the more interesting possibilities here. Attending to the provocations of the text, reading partly (or mostly) becomes an unreading. In this manner, too, the contemporary Filipino novel as mythopoeia undoes the routine of adequating fiction to what it supposedly represents.

It is true that without myth and the accompanying assumptions about it, this study will not proceed at all. In fact, the sections of this paper carry on from superfluous facets of myth that invite, foremost, guarded curiosity from a scholar. Therefore, while myth becomes the currency, it stays unprofitable. Mythopoeia, thus, dares its reader not only to venture into what is already known but to “merely” exist in (im)possibilities without care for gains (Melas 659).

MYTH AS ERROR

In the middle chapter of Rosca’s book, when the war for Philippine territory between the United States and Japan is drawing to a close, a local army unit is sent out to the Central Luzon countryside to quash a growing armed resistance that had intensified against the Japanese. The group of soldiers is led by an American military officer, Mad Uncle Ed. True to his name, the colonel in his extreme ways hounds families in the peasant *barrios* to gather as much intelligence and to arrest what has begun once and for all. In one event and following his morbid sense of the people’s beliefs, he has his soldiers stage the death of a young man whom he had tortured and killed.

When the rodent was caught, Uncle Ed stabbed the corpse twice in the neck with an icepick. He wrung the bat’s neck and ordered the men to take corpse and bat to where roads from four villages converged.

“Spread him there,” he [Mad Uncle Ed] said, “and put the bat on his chest. Scraps of superstition! We’ve never changed you, you people. You still believe there’s something stronger than money and bullets. Obligations and spirits, honor and monsters!” (Rosca 315)

This is one of the innumerable but passing instances where the novel reveals itself to be working at varying levels as narrative. What immediately comes across is the fictional parallel of a counterinsurgency campaign of an ostensibly independent Republic of the Philippines against the Huk Rebellion in the 1950s. The American anti-guerrilla expert Major General Edward Lansdale, during the so-called modernization of the Ministry of National Defense in the country, employed his “unorthodox psychological warfare” against the Huks and the communities believed

to be guerrilla strongholds in the expanse of the Luzon countryside (McClintock part 1, sec. 4). Easily, one may establish how fiction corroborates historical accounts of aggression. The novel also reinforces the culpability of the neocolonial state in its victimization of its own citizens stemming from its military connivance with and political dependence on the US.

Particularly in the story cited above, the aggression materializes with or against the belief of the locals. Mad Uncle Ed intends his fabricated tableau to be understood by the villagers as an attack of the *aswang*, a shape-shifting and bloodsucking creature. He foresees the mass hysteria that this scaremongering will create. Appraising the locals' belief, he deems that its profanation will impede psychologically and ideologically the people in their revolt against foreign rule. In the soldier's game of hunt and destroy, myth has no other function but to morally and politically debilitate the uprising. Closely he appears as what Nietzsche calls the 'Socratic-critical man' turned war machine who considers everything that does not figure into calculation as an "error" (Nietzsche 74). This is to say that for the man of knowledge, whatever is beyond the measure of science, history, or politics may be used in the orchestration of the other's ruin. Since the fault in the circumstances that Mad Uncle Ed finds himself in is incorrigible, he recasts it as warning and punishment to will the believers evil and to decisively gain an advantage in the war. Although certainly, the bigger body of beliefs that contain it have preceded and will outlive this staging, Mad Uncle Ed seems to have more compellingly made an impression about the wrongness of myth.

Because in this particular passage the perspective of the antagonist is the most prominent, the novel exposes its unsure role in the transmission of myth. On the surface, fiction lays bare the lie in belief. Moreover, *SOW* becomes a venue for reinforcing the condescension on Filipino community because of folk belief. Readers may find this off-putting. For instance, Ruth Pison observes that Rosca "rereads Philippine history by mocking Philippine customs and traditions, and so implying nothing is sacred in history" (25-46). Customs here are privileged for their bearing on the country's history. Ma. Teresa Sicat points out the living repository of oral and popular literature from which a number of modern works have drawn to retell a "common" history and origin (429). In the grain of nationalist and postcolonial theorizing in the Philippines, there is an emphasis on a task of preserving or conserving in myths evocations of eminence and homogeneity of the Filipino identity.

Working in reverse, Rosca's narrative highlights an unwholesome permutation of myth. Because myth now finds use at the expense of its believers, contemporary fiction is found to be a failure. However, this is a failure that Rosca demonstrates to be a result of Mad Uncle Ed's inability to see the coherence between myth and

civilization. Granted that he reifies belief to the macabre, the villagers nonetheless stay faithful. Although Mad Uncle Ed's massacre is a painful circumstance that the villagers come to terms with, it cannot end tradition or frustrate the revolution. Mad Uncle Ed's utterance can merely repeat itself to itself in the face of a rather obstinate ancient knowledge. Ironically, exposing the blindness and arrogance of rationality does not lead to an opposite and assured accounting of the indigenous belief. Instead, Rosca shows that fiction makes manifest its shortcomings in vindicating the nation.

If fiction is to be a failure, then it has to be so without remorse. According to Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka embraced failure in his works in such an unconditional manner. In the spirit of modernism, Kafka set aside the preoccupation with origins and, instead, grappled with the remnants of a lost wisdom. As a result, wisdom appeared in his fiction in its most compromised guises. One may find either "rumor" or "folly," the former being a common secret which retains the "intelligence" of the past and the latter as the nonsensical but catchy offshoot of primordial memory (Benjamin 144).

The legend of "*General Nana*" or elderly lady general in *SOW* makes for an interesting example with regard to Benjamin's theory. In the novel, Mayang, an old lady, does become a member of her son's guerrilla group but not exactly in accordance with the legend. The elderly woman, fearing for her son's life, joins him and his fellow students turned fighters in the countryside to stand up against the Japanese. The joke arises at this point for, in reality, she takes charge of domestic chores in the guerrilla camp by foraging and hunting in the wild, cooking for her comrades, and caring for her son. The convergence of reality, rumor, and folly are shown in the resulting events.

She could not know that in the enemy's territories she was a legend, that the old native title of respect, *Nana*, had been construed by the ignorant aliens as a guerrilla alias and that they had set a price on her head. Jake had started the lie, explaining to Luis Carlos that it would protect the identities of the rest of them while enhancing the band's reputation, for it was here, in the selfsame place that two female generals had discombobulated the Spanish garrison during the Revolution many, many years ago. "Besides, it's a good joke," Jake said, laughing, "and your mother's never in the battle zone anyway. She's safe." Luis Carlos had to agree. Thus Manny's guerrilla unit became famous for two things: its musician, said to summon water spirits with an instrument of unspeakable sadness; and its ferocious leader, *General Nana* or General Old Lady. (Rosca 293)

What is comical in this instance arises from the inadequacy of fact compared to the legend. The reality of the old lady's noncombatant status is a far cry from the

rumor about her greatness as a warrior. Yet the locals shrewdly cloak themselves with stories of women fighters. Particularly, the guerrillas cunningly weave their specific experience with the grander folklore. Like Mad Uncle Ed's scheme, *General Nana* is a tactic against the enemy as it is a lie. Again, mythmaking becomes a conscious practice with the ambition for advantage and control. Folklore lends itself to a specific use for the community in order to cover up the realities on the ground and even stir up what is anticipated from the enemy. In a Benjaminian sense, the legend becomes "handle" or a manner not only of dissembling fact but also managing the circumstances (159). The characters claim authority by mythifying the rather scant opportunities on the ground.

As it happens, a reverse order of storytelling, a demythifying of sorts, occurs when the rigid and vulnerable realities are exposed. The "Penelope work" that Benjamin finds in Marcel Proust's writings may shed light on this process. Whenever a tale is woven, a Proustian reader also finds the same story undone by a counter-narrative urge. The story, which is a braiding of the author's conscious remembrances, is disrupted either by forgetfulness or by involuntary memory. The writer cannot help but lose track or be struck by an unsummoned thought. Such a loss or possession suffered by a writer splits a unity into fragments. Curiously for Benjamin, this disintegration is the moment of interest. A simple crack in a tight narrative opens up visions of "the continuum of memory." Such a memory of everything is humanly impossible, and yet here, Benjamin advances its possibility whenever the composer lets go (202-203).

A similar dialectic is at work in the passage where Rosca deflates myth by revealing the mundane and flawed conduct of the revolution. However, the narrative also suspends that disclosure with a wisdom or knowledge emanating from elsewhere. *General Nana's* image, while it may be inaccurate at first, then becomes rumor haphazardly marked with the confidence of a myth about the "two female generals." Although the person of *General Nana* is unverifiable, her influence on the community is strong. Rosca, thus, exemplifies a narration that knots and disentangles fact and fantasy. Even when rumor is stripped of its pretense, it still has the capacity to renew its significance. The facts, then, do not really cancel out belief. In other words, history does not really nullify the myth in Rosca's work. Therefore, the aspirations of the novel to be accurate and representative are deferred. It must be qualified, however, that the ambiguity that prevails cannot, considering Rosca's deep involvement with the Left in the Philippines, be an absolute disavowal of politics. Instead, fiction becomes a critique of the revolutionary ideals whose spirit her writing engages with.

So far, the discussion has focused on aspects of the biggest section of Rosca's work. The "Book of Numbers" reveals the founding of the Villaverde clan whose

members, across generations, take on the task of handing down the nation's story. Despite its sustained seriousness, it is a vast chapter riddled with fanciful episodes. The example below features the matriarch, Maya, intending to set the future of the Villaverdes. Her plan, as it unfolds, catches her unprepared. She ends up uncannily marveling at an 'apparition' of herself in another person.

Instantly, she [Maya] *saw* herself as she must have looked that morning nearly a century ago, as she had stood barefoot in the monastery's kitchen, a cup of cocoa in a slim brown hand, her lips pursed to blow cooling breath on the blistering liquid, her face half turned to look over her shoulder at a tall Capuchin monk who had materialized in the doorway. She had worn clothes like these and her hair had tickled her ankles, though to keep its wild strands away her eyes she had run about her forehead, behind her ears and knotted at her nape, a ribbon of intricately designed beads, one of those woven by then still savage tribes in the forest. At the same time, she *understood* that this was exactly how Carlos Lucas should find this girl—at a particular hour of a morning of fragility, barefoot and reckless, a cup of cocoa midway to her pursed lips, both he and she in ignorance of how this had happened before, so they could believe this strange instant to be their own invention. (Rosca 189, emphasis added)

This passage cues the intervention of Maya in bringing about the marriage of her bastard son, Carlos Lucas, with her Chinese maid's daughter, a namesake, Maya. However, there is a limit to the older woman's mediation. For sure, she has masterminded this matchmaking, but as to how far she exerts control is unsure. Her participation is partly modified by her submission to what is unfolding. Maya, together with Carlos Lucas and the girl, enacts a miracle fusion of reality and imagination, of present and myth. Although she comprehends from a precarious vantage point of wisdom, she is as immersed as the unknowing actors in this dreamlike sequence. The mythopoeic force in Rosca's narrative is embodied in these fleeting moments scattered all over this bigger narrative of war. These instances demand inhabiting, or even complicity, with the surreal.

The modern attitude toward miracle would almost invariably be condescension if not incredulity. Nietzsche deplores the modern individual for having embraced the "critical-historical" lessons of the moment so tightly that one has ended up losing the bond with myth. Regretfully, myth can now only be made intelligible in theory or as fiction (Nietzsche 109). Between the rational and supernatural, the empirical and conjectural, or the modern and the mythical, the fissure widens. In the middle of this gap or at "the heart of the impossible," as Benjamin calls it, lies mythopoeia whose constitution are these diverging sensibilities (201). In a sense, mythopoeia will not hold water unless the reader or critic accepts the invitation of fiction to occupy myth and yield to contingency.

Through myth, Rosca makes sensible a creative energy that undoes and reorients reading of the postcolonial novel. The three examples raised so far show that myth, ever present and evocable, serves, on one hand, as a foothold for judgment and decision. Yet on the other, myth also generates visions of a bigger reality in which the finite achievements of characters are founded. When the rare becomes the norm, that is to say when characters' subjectivities are influenced by a deep mythical awareness, the novel proves to be an illuminating material about myth's destructive and productive impacts on narrative. To an extent, myth is the agency through which individuals and communities act and exert power. However, it, being the repository of memories of all life, is also a hovering threat against practice and order. In other words, subjectivity, even in its struggle to prevail and orchestrate, also always faces a constant threat of being overcome by voices and truths in simultaneity. Individuals in *SOW* often intuit that their situations are parts of a cycle of repetition. As each character seeks to demarcate a beginning and end, the entire narrative arrests such effort with repetitions or flashes of memory. Obscure images and voices that glimmer in the narrative shatter the arrogance of subjectivity, the credibility of a unique phenomenon, more so the flow of history. Rosca's "strange instant" or the present is, thus, revealed as no more than part of an even stranger and incalculable whole.

Setting action against an unmanageable condition, the modernist writer, according to Bell, demonstrates her "strategic anti-humanism, aimed not against the human, but against the limits of humanism" (*Literature* 75). Through myth, the fictionist creates in the text the energy that prompts and, in the same breath, drowns out human judgment. The anti-humanism in the text refers, therefore, to the point when the metaphysical annuls the material instances of myth. As in *SOW*, characters are empowered through storytelling. Yet even in wielding myth out of political resolve, they claim agency for unsure and unmeasurable ends.

MYTH AS NONSENSE

Critics have pointed out the elusiveness of meaning in Rosca's mythopoeic narratives, and only a few would attribute any radical quality to myth in her fiction. In particular, Myra Mendible, who reads *SOW* as a "festival-text," notes that a part of the subversive potential of the novel resides in the fantastic events that comprise a story told against the grain of history (30-39). As the narration proceeds, a contrary current of anti-realism incites the strange. In Bell's terms, the marvelous that comes up does not really "offer itself for imitation" (*Literature* 75). For that, mythical instances can be brushed off as the unaccountable impediment to the flow of history. If they are to be understood, they can easily be domesticated under

friendlier rubrics. However, myth in *SOW* is so pervasive that a critic cannot help explore other paths in reading. In the face of magic, how, then, is interpretation to proceed?

A bizarre meeting between the two Mayas can easily queer orthodox thinking. The girl “sleeps with” her soon-to-be mother-in-law, Maya, to receive “instructions” in her forthcoming marriage with the elder’s only son.

She was nearly asleep, lulled by this vision, when the girl moved and before Maya realized what she proposed to do the girl loomed over her, stooped, and pressed her body against the length of Maya’s body, her hands on Maya’s hands, palm to palm, pinning them to the pillow. The weight, the glint in the girl’s eyes only two inches away from her own threw her into confusion and, before she could stop herself, she was back within the monastery, deep in the cellar, where among the casks of Benedictine wine she and her monk had celebrated their alliance. (Rosca 191)

As the women touch, a portal seems to open up between them to allow an unbridled passage of knowledge. An outpouring of memories of Maya and her ancestors follows after the excerpt above. The spate of images transports the old woman simultaneously to different pasts. She relives her prurient affair with a Capuchin friar, her thankless travails as mother to her bastard sons, and her innocent beginnings with her peasant husband. Through the girl, she also sees into lives she had not lived. She is reunited with a grandmother she had not known and learns about women’s celebrated life in a pristine age.

Satiety takes over Maya after this physical contact, and, as unusual as this style of education, she receives from the girl the date of her death. The sensuality in this odd union cannot be stressed enough. In the text, the overflow of Maya’s worldly experiences comes with feelings of “shame” and “pain” as if she were “confess[ing]” sins (191). In spite of that, Maya and the girl reach an unrepentant sense of satisfaction and revival. So what is to be made of this, as it were, mating of women for knowledge?

In Georg Lukacs’s formulations, this uninterpretable passage suits the label of the dissonant in fiction. While art, in general, seeks to reconcile the “metaphysical dissonance of life,” the novel, according to Lukacs, accomplishes this in a more perilous manner. The mythical appears as the cryptic component of modern fiction. As one tries to pin down the meaning of the mythical visions, the reader all the more finds the independence of these manifestations in the text. With myth, one realizes that the parts making up modern fiction are heterogeneous. What appears more obviously is the fact that the novel, despite its claims to coherence and unity, is, in truth, “fragile.” In the Lukacsian sense, the passage above, as much

as the other instances cited, makes up the unintelligible fragments that interrupt and render imperfect the form (71). The implication here is that the incompatibility between the ancient and modern forms makes impossible the recuperation of meaning of the mythical.

On a different note, Benjamin rejects the notion that the meaning of the ancient may be absolutely eclipsed by the new. The mythical does not merely pose as that flash of metaphysics in fiction. Instead, Benjamin stresses the kinship between the prehistoric and modern forms. The epic and the novel belong to the lineage of narrative. As such, one sheds light on the meaning of the other. In his essays on Kafka, he supports such affinity with the notion of memory.

What has been forgotten. . . is never something purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products. (Benjamin 131)

The call to focus on the “prehistoric world” in this amalgam of the forgotten is a Benjaminian encouragement to understand wisdom now displaced and evoked in fiction.⁶ In the passage above, he suggests that the adhesion of images in memory is what secures the forgotten room in the novel. In *SOW*, Rosca also saturates the moment of recall with sundry events in the immediate and distant beginnings. In doing so, she promotes Benjamin’s theory. The unusual transmission of memories between the women emphasizes a way of knowing and telling that subverts dominant and rigid systems of exchange and education. Memory as density, as that which builds on what has been relegated to oblivion, not only interrupts the structured efforts at narration but instantiates “collective wisdom” with the mythical as its sinew and core (Mendible 36; Benjamin 159).

Granted Lukacs’s idea that myth is immiscible, the metaphysical visions in the text nevertheless pan out. The remoteness of myth does not diminish its volatility in the modern genre. For Rosca the mythical is not a purely random occurrence in the novel. Myth, the writer insists, does not simply exist in-itself in fiction; it is not absolutely autonomous. Instead, the mythical clashes with the circumstances in the present. In fact, myth in the novel cushions characters’ actions in the same way that it transmutes into the author’s medium for narration. Such affirmation of the metaphysical in fiction is a firm indication of her committed modernism. Even if she bends the rules in writing, her responsibilities as a Filipina artist continue to define her work.

The antithetical relationship between past and present or text and context is actually a powerful motivation for creation. According to Rosca, the contradictions comprise the impetus for the artist to narrate the “national self” (qtd. in Mendible

32). Hau also brings up a similar issue in analyzing Rizal's fiction. Paradoxically, Rizal was able to paint a distinct image of the colonial hardship with only passing and intermittent appearances of the general masses. How could Rizal have written the story of the nation without covering in detail the plight of the "ordinary people" under the colonial government? "Eavesdropping," according to Hau, was the narrative device by which the author managed to portray aspects of the lives of the community. This is, perhaps, Rizal's sincerest gesture to his compatriots. In any case, he could not have wholly accounted for the nation. Marginal characters, thus, speak in anonymous voices in the narrative. The unofficial stories that they divulge gather with and splinter from the finer narrative of the colonials. The novel, on the whole, proves to be constituted by what is and is not fathomable (Hau 90).

Like Rizal's stories, *SOW* features characters other than Anna who deal with socio-political upheavals. These nameless or hardly visible characters populate the margins of the text. They all speak, but they address their stories to no one. The Chinaman, the revolutionary, the peasants, even Anna's torturer and enemy of the resistance are just some of the strange individuals who remind, caution, and teach. Their stories are merely loosely assimilated into the main narrative. Yet Rosca stubbornly airs their wisdoms emanating from obscure sources. In the process, she also blurs the divide between historical and mythical, finite and infinite, rational and irrational, present and eternal. Hau develops this notion of blurring brought about by these voices that speak from a "disenfranchised" position. True enough, *SOW*'s liminal characters, as they stand up to be heard, also reveal how faint their voices are (Hau 84). All these reinforce the way of the writer, which begins at the impossible, rather paralyzing point, of including all that cannot be confined.

For Rosca, the difficulty in writing the nation lies in the fundamental necessity to transcend the personal. To be a "Filipino writer," she says, requires one to step out of oneself and into the "collective self" in order "to look at the world with the eyes of his or her people and his or her history" (qtd. in Davis 65). The interpersonal insight, as in the passage of the two Mayas sharing and stepping into the past and future, is an impossibility that Toni Morrison also often treads on her narratives with what many consider her innovation, "rememory." In her fiction, "memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people." Removed from its personal containment, it is, instead, destabilized. In the works of the women writers, the negotiation results in the momentary freeing of memory, where people stumble into memories of others. These uncanny circumstances give rise to an uncommodifiable charge in narration. In a way, "magic" happens in fiction (Rushdy 321-22). These flashes of memory bring about the concrescence of the forgotten and mythical. More importantly, they open up potential junctures for collective thought and action. They are the sparks in the present in whose duration, Benjamin believes, the revolutionary promise emerges.

MYTH AS RUPTURE

As a festival, Rosca's world is momentarily spared from imminent destruction. The first and the last chapters of *SOW* show how the characters as spectators are attracted and drawn in by the panoply of appearances and guises. The spectacle of the festival eases the apprehensions of individuals over the insurgency. In addition, drunkenness is symbolically implied in the first chapter and is literally accounted for later in the last book. This inebriation that pervades the town is an indication of the abandonment and violence that, through the fantasy of the festival, was temporarily kept in check. Here, the dialectic of vision and destruction becomes the mythopoeic wellspring of Rosca's otherwise humble and historical narrative. This interminable alternation of order and chaos in *SOW* may be likened to the conflicting bond between the two deities, Apollo and Dionysus. The former is the god of artistic forms, the latter, of rapture and abandonment. For Nietzsche, the constant succession of these Apollonian and Dionysian powers must be conveyed in narrative. The "hidden primal contradiction" in the world, once intuited, lets its audience understand what founds and nourishes individual and collective pursuits (50). This non-human energy is a motivating force in Rosca's fiction. It serves as springboard for her characters' actions.

The description of the mob in the last chapter gives away the brittleness of order. After a prolonged procession around the town, the throng of people starts to be overcome by an "energy of desperation." Becoming one with the "compact mass," the protagonist's thoughts are made futile, and her action is consumed (Rosca 28, 364). The mob, now a drunken and mindless assemblage, defeats individuality. It impels the festival toward destruction.

Indeed, especially in crises, an individual confronts the ethical responsibility to act in favor of the majority and to sacrifice toward social transformation. In this case, Anna submits herself to the political cause of bringing down the dictator. The protagonist's intentions interlock with the collective zeal for radical change. However, such resolve also leads to a rather fearsome realization that the outcome is irreducible to the attending conditions and efforts. In truth, the revolution exceeds even the best laid program for social change.

The final chapter matches the apocalyptic tone of its title, the "Book of Revelations," as Anna becomes witness to a bombing at the height and center of the town festival. Here, Rosca completes the narrative of a revolution, which Rizal frustrates in *El Fili*. The escalating tension in the 1970s that culminated in the Plaza Miranda bombing may have made it conceivable for Rosca to dramatize the excessiveness of a war, which is to say that, like Rizal's, hers is a story specific to its milieu. As historically violent as it was, no effort has turned up a credible case

against any individual or group culpable for the incident. Not even with a solid motive of then incumbent president Ferdinand Marcos nor of the underground Left, the bombing to date remains unsolved (Tiglao). On a fictional plane, Rosca settles the issue of accountability by letting the reader in on its beginnings.

Rizal may have likely inspired Rosca. In *El Fili*, the impetus for radical change begins in the intellectual, Simoun, with his maddened desire for ridding the nation of its oppressors and cleansing the ranks of the oppressed (Rizal 314-317). The 19th century hero's patriotic mission, although muddled by a syndicalist urge, dramatized a possibility of pursuing independence from colonialism. In the end, his move was thwarted by the colonial state and church. Meanwhile in *SOW*, the bombing is revealed to be an orchestration of Ismael Guevarra, the ever elusive guerrilla leader, who is reported to have carried it out as the only "luxury" that he has ever granted himself (Rosca 359). Again, the individual instigates destabilization. To Rizal, the resulting inhumanity of the individual act mattered most. To Rosca, it mattered most and least simultaneously. At the end of *SOW*, Guevarra's act becomes merely one of the terms that characterize the uncontrollable process of the resistance. Rosca undoes Rizal's conservatism by suggesting that the cataclysm ensues inexorably from the circumstances where the individual is merely an instrument and audience.

Considering its parallelism with Benjamin's "angel" of history, the bombing scene may be taken as fiction's critique of itself. Anna, caught in the middle of the moment, becomes the juncture of the revolutionary subject and the weak Benjaminian messiah. On one hand, she is the knowing subject. She understands, anticipates, and calculates what is to happen. She sees through the festival's unreal time, where "the town hall clock was permanently set at six o'clock," and becomes the moment's temporal reference, as she counts down to the last minute before the explosion. Yet with all the commotion that the rational being vies with, Anna can merely watch, "stunned" and "frozen at her corner" (Rosca 366, 388).

Before the explosion, a cinematic scene portrays Anna pushing into the festival while being pulled away by the crowd. Desperately, she tries to save her friends and her people from what will be the catastrophe. "She was running, dodging strays from the Festival, the children who could not get through the crush of people" (Rosca 366). This only shows that, on the other hand, she also represents the perfectly helpless historian. Before her eyes, the plot founders as the bomb misses the dictator and, instead, harms her loved ones. Like the angel in Paul Klee's painting, Anna is pushed away and forward by the more forceful current of history. She is unable to ward off or solve the present danger (Benjamin 257). In the same way that the main character is always beset with the trouble of having to move on but wanting to heed a need, the reader of *SOW* is also continually confronted with

a dilemma of whether to proceed or to wonder at the visions. To seize on the past is completely risky. In refusing to look ahead, Anna denies that any program of action could lead to a fixed end. Paying attention to memory, she partly locates answers to her questions, but mostly disentangles herself with the current of progress (Benjamin 255).

Toward the end, the novel gives its highest attestation to contingency by leaving Anna's desires unfulfilled. Every shock, every radical event such as a blasting carries with it not only an anarchic urge, which in the novel is already couched in the frenzied mood of the festival, but also a radical force whose destructive impacts defy determination (Beiner 423-434). Such force crushes human subjectivity.

The conditions of individuality and contingency are in *SOW* shown to be consistently at odds. Not 25 pages in the first chapter, such conflict already appears when Rosca goes into her speculative extreme. The scene in reference may be taken as a depiction of the 1987 Mendiola Massacre. Peasant demonstrators, demanding from the government genuine land reform and distribution, suffered at least 12 deaths and a couple of injuries in the hands of government authorities under Marcos' successor, Corazon Aquino (Marcelo). However, Rosca works hard to retell the event as a gathering by some happenstance among the ordinary people. There were fishermen, farmers, the man in the street, a bus driver, a passenger, schoolchildren, men and women, all being bearers of the economic crisis. When in the story the state answers the masses' anger (hurled in the form of stones, expressed in the bonfire they built on the street) with guns and grenades, not only do they fight back but they speak.

...over the contrapunta of gunshots and whoomph of teargas canister, the delicate shattering of glass as the crowd retreated, smashing display windows of unaffordable merchandise. They scattered, regrouped, gave way and regained lost ground, dragged out the wounded and the dead, crawled through debris to hurl pillboxes with their makeshift shrapnel of nails and glass shards, and yelled from time to time, in bitter humor, at the soldiers. *Surrender now*, they shrieked in a half-dozen languages, *we are the people*. (24, emphasis in original)

Excited by the vision, Anna "want[s] to reply" to the people yet can only "watch from safety." At the most, she can only "savor the words" of the nation's attestation to its tangibility (24). Again, this is another way of setting Rosca apart from Rizal. Hau demonstrates that the latter was constantly frustrated in depicting the nation. In contrast, Rosca risks her fiction and allows the text to rupture in order that the unknowable—the nation or the revolution in its totality—may momentarily be sensed. In her fiction, individual subjectivity becomes a mode which is undone in the face of what it can only behold: the multitude affirming its humanity in the midst

of contingency. Conversely, the text also suggests that whatever is conceivable does not always owe itself to reason. Again, Rosca reminds that fiction will never be the medium of the nation except when it surrenders its structure to become something else. In that minute interval dramatizing the street protest when all the narrative voices withdraw, the nation breaks out of the text and professes itself in many tongues. The impossible that Rizal strove toward Rosca was able to momentarily apprehend. It is the essentially heterogeneous nation bodying itself forth and becoming singularly real.

A mechanism here lets reading surpass the mimetic test. That the scene is a possible portrayal of a violent occurrence among the Filipinos is one interpretation that the text affords. It is fiction's generosity to readers; the text grants chances to generate meaning. Hence, hermeneutics as an activity finds justification. However, to a certain extent, the scene above dodges interpretation. Recalling Lukacs, the excerpt turns into a pure fragment. The mythified picture can only portray nothing other than itself. On the level of the text, it is, after all, a slip of narrative control whereby an odd thing, the unknowable, is known, and, in a sacred-profane sense, God is apprehended. In many ways, the author's venture into pure fragments in fiction assails the politics that a fictionist must nonetheless maintain. Through her work, Rosca arrogates a reading practice of its own, an unreading, as it were, which is a part of even as it seems contrary to habit and tradition. It is Rosca's disguised manifesto. With her novel, she insists on an aesthetic tangibility whose resistances and submissions to politics only prove literature's elasticity. These scenes, which momentarily fail to remind but merely shock, make sensible, however short-lived and frail, the "sovereignty" that literature weaves for itself (O' Keeffe 109-115).

Except for the one above and a few passing instances, the revolution never completely reveals itself to Anna. As a history major in the university, later on becoming a cadre, and having been tortured by the military, she poses as the knowledgeable and experienced subject of history. Yet her path into the heart of the struggle is arduous as it is premised on what escapes her understanding (Hau 40, 45). Through Anna, the text engages with the incomprehensible. A kind of sporadic immersion in the mythical, writing, in Rosca's way, turns into an adventure that cannot help but renege, every now and then, on its advocacy for revolutionary change.

MYTH AS REGRESSION

A sustained research on folklore under the rubric of Philippine Studies has yielded rich material on ethno-linguistic groups. Needless to say, literary studies continue to gain ground partly because of the continuing efforts in the social sciences to locate oral and written narratives in the context of the various Filipino communities' socio-political conduct across history. Straddling these two disciplines, as well as state and leftist ideologies, Bienvenido Lumbera has turned up in his decades' work important indigenous and regional literatures. His historical-political framework, particularly in *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology*, has also become influential in academic discussions on these literary productions. His cause appears more prominently in another work where he shows that, thus far, English has stayed as the default criterion for which writing in the Philippines gains renown. He, thus, exhorts his audience to recoup literature in various ethno-languages in order to countervail the elitist literary canon in the country ("Harnessing" 155).

Critics, however, who speak within the vicinity of Lumbera's Left-wing nationalism, point out the dangers in the latter's approach. For instance, Edel Garcellano finds in such a search for the indigenous an underlying nativist essentialism that becomes problematic in contemporary criticism. While possibly fruitful, the recovery stays in vain for fixing a peripheral space for (and exoticizing) regional literatures in relation to a canon at the center (Garcellano 242-243). Notwithstanding their differences, Lumbera and Garcellano both suggest an analytical scheme in which folk literature, an integral part of which is myth, is understood through historical and ideological lenses.

The critics do not so much as resist one another as they, altogether, test and question the possibility of myth serving as poetics. In fact, in the yet young practice of literary criticism in the Philippines, the mythical has received its fair share of critique stemming from fairly well-grounded skeptical viewpoints. Generally, there is resistance against utopian ends offered by myth. Garcellano polemically discusses the escapist resort that the mythical often serves in literature. The attention to a native origin, as the critique goes, while possibly exigent, also works at its own expense for idealizing a status beyond the circumstances of conflict. More importantly, nativist tendencies in writing often dislodge reading from attending political and historical conditions (Garcellano 240-244).

Epifanio San Juan, Jr. also rebukes postcolonial criticism for the futile preoccupation that it has become in the face of oppressions within the "the neoliberal reality." He notes that postcolonial readings have invariably found convenience in "automatic" or unfounded valorization of otherness. Unfortunately for the critic, the

postcolonial enterprise, despite its “subversive” intent, has stayed ineffectual on the ground (236-37). While this is not the venue to rehearse the debates, it is important to show that, between the social sciences and literary studies, a splintering of interests has transpired, with one putting in confines and the other doubting the relevance of myth and folklore altogether. Specifically in literary critique in the country, there seems to be a thoroughgoing positivistic campaign—an unwitting rider to the defense of capitalist expansion—that has preempted literature from reconciling with its peculiarities as a cultural production and with its otherness to politics. Rosca has been speaking alternatives to this (similarly) “automatic” reduction of literature to politics. The totality of her works which began to come out in the 1970s demonstrates her incessant efforts to claim literature’s realness. By claiming, Rosca also makes imperative the coming to grips with the oddness of literature. Of course, this is the oddness that retards the conduct of a common project, but this is also the same quality that lets literature *be*. With *SOW*, Rosca lives out a poetics that revivifies literature in the course of many and prolonged deaths that it has suffered in criticism.

Given the wariness against nativism, it is easy to construe the last image in *SOW* as a utopia that folds into unknown eras. The following passage shows the aftermath of the explosion where Anna, having fled the town, now becomes a teacher among children in the countryside. With an awareness of the change in her, she intuits a scene of the future.

As in a dream, she felt her own hand touching her neck, the space between her breasts, her belly, her navel. And she knew. Instantly. She was pregnant, the child was male, and he would be born here, with the *labuyo*—consort of mediums and priestesses—in attendance. He would be nurtured as much by her milk as by the archipelago’s legends—already she was tucking Guevarra’s voice among other voices in her mind—and he would be the first of the Capuchin monk’s descendants to be born innocent, without fate...She knew all that instantly, with great certainty, just as she knew that her son would be a great storyteller, in the tradition of children of priestesses. He would remember his name being a history unto itself, for he would be known as Ismael Villaverde Banyaga. (Rosca 382)

It must be noted that the dream in this passage restores itself from the devastation. The revolution breaks out whereupon no reality of better or superior promise emerges, merely a present with clairvoyance as its only avenue to a future. Rosca conveys here how she breaks from the radical ideology that her story dramatizes.

Recalling one of Benjamin’s theses may clarify a point against the rash tendency to discredit myth in fiction. In the context of the resistance against European Fascism, he critiques Social Democracy for its emphasis on the revolutionary task aimed at the future. He concludes, “This training made the working class forget

both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (260). Whatever was squandered in the forward course toward the ideal of "liberated grandchildren" ended up compromising the health of the insurgency. Along the way, the Social Democratic movement became responsible for the erasure of their ancestor's gifts of sacrifice. In the same way, critics, on pain of death, have succumbed to a drawn-out routine of interpretation.

Rosca takes up Benjamin on his lesson by assuring that Anna's child—history's own—shall be nourished by forgotten wisdoms. Anna vows to stay attuned to memory which inflates each moment with "volatility." Such unsure junctures demand from those in attendance keenness, more so acquiescence, to enduring wisdoms. Benjamin also leaves an important mark in criticism. He (un)schools the critic to take stock of the past, for then, one keeps practice animated, remarkable, and, best of all, "militant."⁷ Militancy is the weapon against (empty) time and thought. As opposed to critiquing, unreading Rosca now becomes a reconciliation with her narrative. With unreading, one gains insight into the (unknowable) totality of life, which is the sustenance of and threat to art.

If Rosca's stamp on writing the nation's struggles is ever to be understood, it must be in light of what she shares with Benjamin and Nietzsche. She redeems the present through myth. She implies that the revolutionary impulse lies in the collapse between the present with the prehistory of freedom and defiance. In this "'backward' anti-capitalistic impulse," the current of progress is radically cut off (McRobbie 91). Memory and myth unsettle and bring to implosion teleology.

Of many things, *SOW* is an affirmation of the anti-neocolonial resistance that endures to this day, only that it is an affirmation complicated by a rejection of a programmed future. The present, fraught with uncertainties, is the only site of choice and action. This is what causes unease with the present, the onus of decision making. Because it rests on an "unthinkable" totality, the action that must ensue is accompanied by an incalculable risk (Nealson 101-106).⁸

There are better preoccupations than laboriously proving the obverse of myth, ridding it of its danger, and reducing it to a fault. As the above discussion shows, there is no denying that every evocation of myth is partly an expression of nostalgia and an admission of its ahistoricity. These are faults, however, which make life endurable or simply conceivable. For Nietzsche, the error, for the most part, is an ingredient for a universal law, a principle for productive struggle toward dignified existence. He thus encourages his readers to contemplate on this necessary contradiction. He remarks that "the unhistorical and the historical are necessary

in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture” (Nietzsche qtd. in Bell, *Literature* 33).

This antinomy being integral to Rosca’s novel may ground the observation that critical theory of the Filipino nation has stayed ambivalent about or even dismissive of her writing. Owing to her own modernism, her work complicates if not resists interpretation. There stays in her work an “implicit” urge for aesthetic independence which is “conceal[ed]” as the work stakes itself in the political debate of its time (*Literature* 22). This energy is present, only not for inclusion in the mathematics of literary devices, meanings and contexts whose sum spells the victories of (the critic over) the text. This aesthetic drive is not important for the accounting of losses and gains, in which case, it is dismissible. Without exception, however, this core of Rosca’s novel, as it is of art in general, cannot be degraded.

So far, as well, this undertaking in seeking to understand Rosca’s mythopoeia has had to surface issues like error, nonsense, rupture, and retrogression—all of which challenge if not impede criticism as it is practiced. Of course, whatever cannot be surfaced, while it primarily resides in the form and substance of the novel, also demands, among other things, difference or a thinking otherwise. Within the fold of norm, there is also the non-critical. Only when this defeat is affirmed does criticism recover from predictability and lifelessness. Criticism thrives again and becomes its own other: inhabiting. This is an instance of what Susan Sontag calls an “erotics of art” in her manifesto against “hermeneutics.” The reader disposes of meaning as a basis of critical victory over the text and instead “experiences” the text in its formal peculiarities (Sontag sec. 9-10). One may rework her lesson and incorporate in criticism the sensual experience of the text. This is Bell’s case of “critical perception” where the distance of reader from the work is bridged, thereby forestalling absolute transcendence of critic from text and vice versa (*Literature* 194).

It must be noted that it is through myth suffusing the novel with a recalcitrant energy that unreading becomes possible. The text, as it is examined, also parries the abuse of interpretation and, instead, demands, however “provisional” it may be, a kind of making oneself present in the story (*Literature* 194). Like Rosca’s Anna who is overwhelmed despite her resolve, or Maya who learns as she educates, the reader, pervious in the task, also becomes text. Just as Nietzsche’s mythical Maya who, as the embodiment of order and everyday appearances, crumbles “before the mysterious primal Oneness,” so too does the critic in the face of the unintelligible is outdone (Nietzsche 17). Mythopoeia, thus, turns readership into a negotiation or, if only momentarily, a forfeiting of one’s authority to rationalize. For these moments of unreading and responding to (the past that inheres in) the present assure that practice may continue with confidence in a future.

Notes

1. Presented in the Third International Conference on Linguistics, Literature and Culture in Malaysia, this paper was later on rewritten based on the feedback during the *Kritika Kultura* Criticism Workshop on May 13-15, 2015 at the Ateneo De Manila University. Dr. Francis Gealogo led the panel which included Dr. Jayeel Serrano Cornelio and Prof. Ramon Guillermo. Dr. Oscar Campomanes's suggestions were also incorporated in the rewrite.
2. Although emphatic about her indebtedness to the notion of *Imagined Communities*, Hau clearly out-imagines Benedict Anderson by once and for all doing away with the notion of a top-down mechanics of the rise of nationalism. Hau questions the "modular" theory of the organization of communities into a nation. For the critic, the non-Western (notion of) nation could not simply have been derivations from the West. Otherwise, such a formulation reveals itself to be hinged on a gross binarism that, on one end, promotes the imported intellectual sensibility and, on the other, hints at an inadequacy of indigenous practice in writing the national experience. Even a work as important as Resil Mojares's *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel* came close to implying this (Hau 60-63). In reworking the novel as discursive practice that foremost indicates a position (and not necessarily or outright a supposed referent or reality) side by side the many other articulations, Hau upsets this thinking and radicalizes the method/s of reading literature.
3. In a span of five years since 2003, University of the Philippines Press published separate writings by Hau, Pison and Elmo Gonzaga on *Dog eaters*. Interestingly, the readability of Hagedorn's work also depended on the readiness of ideology theories. Aside from Pison's book cited and discussed above, see also works of Gonzaga (66-94) and of Hau in the anthology edited by Pantoja Hidalgo and Patajo-Legasto (116-129).
4. Shail Mayaram, studying "borderline" Muslim communities in India, challenges the divide set up between contemporary thought and oral literature. She argues that "history and myth" are "not exclusive modes of representation" (Mayaram 30-42; Mayaram qtd. in Nandy 45). Looking into oral literature, one actually finds "liminality." For example, Mayaram discovers that the Meo people's poetic tradition is always in, as it were, a state of becoming. One moment it is factual, another time, it is supernatural. She therefore moves to change the common approach to oral genres.

However, the otherness of oral cultures to modernity often comes to prominence. In fact, modernity is hailed often at the expense of the former. This is Ashis Nandy's observation in his polemical examination of history in Indian academia which has, he argues, universalized the uneven and volatile conditions and sensibilities of societies in unambiguously causal and rigid empirical relations. "[The] ahistoricals have become the dissenting minority," he proclaims. For instance, indigenous groups in Bengal, which depend on "myths, legends and epics" as the only living records of the past, are being "threatened or victimized" (46, 51).

5. The assumption here is that the “heightened” experience of the text rarely happens on “first-time reading.” A meaningful relationship between reader and text can only transpire upon repetition of reading, after the entirety of the text has been apprehended. Calinescu stresses this to question literary theorists who take for granted rereading as foundation to criticism. Critics “do not distinguish between reading and rereading” (51). For the same reason, they tend to value the text only as to its susceptibility to interpretation. Other means of valuing the text are set aside.
6. In illustrating that the novel is distinct “from all other forms of prose literature. . . [because] it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it,” Benjamin posits a gap between the forms. He elucidates the economic and political disparities during which the oral and the written prose separately emerged. Yet he takes pains at explaining how memory, the oft-unseen connection, fundamentally ties the novel to epic. Calling it muse-derived, he shows that this faculty of both the storyteller and the novelist unites their genres despite their foreignness to each. As flashes of “reminiscences” in the epic and as “perpetual remembrance” in fiction, memory or Mnemosyne becomes a cord of unity. Because this kinship is mythically founded, it is, on one hand, forgotten or brushed aside. On the other hand, their union is resistant to degradation (Benjamin 87, 98). In effect, the associations and divisions between the genres are obvious and at the same time unknown.
7. This essay benefits from Christopher Neilson’s use of Benjaminian concepts. However, Neilson employs terms like “volatility” and “militancy” within a Marxist frame. It is interesting to note that under a Benjaminian persuasion, Neilson lends his terms to good use even when, like in this essay, thoughts start veering toward speculation. See Neilson 101-106.
8. Neilson takes from continental thought the use of mathematical concepts as critique of the Hegelian dialectic and of ideology discourses, in general. Inspired by the concept of Georg Cantor, a part of his striking passage goes, “. . .the (quantifiable) totality of Cantor’s transfinite of the thinkable is unthinkable.” See Neilson 101-106.

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